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SUBJECT: REINTEGRATION MINISTER YAKOBASHVILI EAGER TO TRY
NEW IDEAS

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b&d)

Summary

¶1. (C) New State Minister for Reintegration Temuri Yakobashvili has thus far managed to retain the penchant for provocative thinking and creative ideas that he exhibited in his years as an NGO leader. In a February 8 meeting with DCM, Yakobashvili detailed some of the ideas he has been discussing publicly, including the easing of economic sanctions on Abkhazia and enhanced communication with ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetians, as well as with the Russians. He is also instituting an advisory council that will include a broad spectrum of views, including some harsh critics of the government's policies. Yakobashvili said assistance programs to promote confidence building in South Ossetia are working, and he would like somehow to copy that format in Abkhazia. Yakobashvili pointed to some encouraging signs that Russia's policy on South Ossetia might be shifting. His assessment is consistent with what OSCE Head of Mission Hakala has told the Ambassador separately: there are small signs the Russians may be looking for a way out of their current support of separatist leader Kokoity. While it is not yet clear how much room Yakobashvili will be given to move Georgia's policy on the conflicts toward greater engagement, he acts like a man eager to test the limits. End Summary.

Re-Organizing the Ministry to Increase Engagement

¶2. (C) Yakobashvili said that while he had not yet completed his assessment of the Ministry's role, his initial approach would focus on three directions:

-- Direct talks with Abkhaz and Ossetians. He said "people are the priority," and in addition to the two separatist regimes he wanted to talk to Abkhaz and Ossetians in Russia and other countries, to Sanakoyev, to North Ossetia, and others. Yakobashvili said he would focus on a future in which Georgia "takes care of ethnicities" and this is what he meant by his public statements about "repatriating people," not just territory. He made clear that a part of his focus would be on repatriating Abkhaz from abroad, something the Abkhaz have raised many times with us.

-- Talks with Russia. Yakobashvili said both his ministry and the MFA were re-organizing to put greater emphasis on the relationship with Russia. He said he wanted to talk to all parties, including the Duma and the business community in Russia.

-- Engagement with Western partners and international organizations. Yakobashvili said he especially wanted to activate the Europeans to greater support.

¶3. (C) To pursue these objectives, Yakobashvili said he had won a 70% increase in the budget of the State Ministry, which

would permit a major increase in staff. Yakobashvili has (thus far at least) retained Deputy State Ministers Dimitri Manjavidze and Ruslan Abashidze, both holdovers from Merab Antadze's tenure as State Minister, and he said he would add a third deputy, David Rakviashvili, currently an executive at Caucasus Travel. He said the State Ministry would add a legal department and a number of other new positions. He said he hoped to add former UN diplomat (and former Polish diplomat) Marian Staszewski as an expert, funded by the Embassy of Poland.

¶4. (C) Yakobashvili stressed that he was talking to a wide range of people outside government to get the best possible advice, including outspoken opposition figures such as David Usupashvili, Tinatin Khidasheli, and former State Minister Giorgi Khaindrava. He said he even planned to talk to former President Shevardnadze. Yakobashvili said he had a number of commitments already for an experts council he had announced that would offer advice on a longer-term basis. It would not include political leaders, he said, but it would include such government critics as Paata Zakareishvili, Ivliane Khaindrava, and Giorgi Khutsishvili. (Note: The inclusion of Zakareishvili is particularly noteworthy given his strong criticism of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs for alleged covert activities in Abkhazia's Gali district. End Note.)

Breaking Down Walls

¶5. (C) Yakobashvili said he intended to focus strongly on achieving concrete results, including trade links between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, greater NGO contacts between the sides, opening businesses, improving the assistance framework, and creating conditions for IDP return.

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He said he thought exchanges, cultural programs, and diplomatic and NGO travel to the separatist regions were positive ways to give Abkhaz and South Ossetians access to different views. Echoing his public statements, he said he hoped to be able to reduce Georgia's economic sanctions against Abkhazia. He stressed that this would be a step-by-step process, beginning with the two sides negotiating a legal framework for trade across the cease-fire line, followed by steps to ensure security. He said he supported re-opening the railroad toward Sukhumi, but added that he would not go as far as re-opening the Sukhumi airport. He said he had talked with Lasha Tugushi, editor of Resonance newspaper, about ideas for a free trade zone, but Yakobashvili stressed that he would not support some kind of special industrial park sealed off from the populations. "The last thing we need," he said, "is more walls."

Re-Thinking Formats

¶6. (C) Yakobashvili said he wanted to find new formats that would replace or serve as an umbrella over existing formats that have outlived their usefulness. He expressed strong support for the UN's upcoming review of the peace process in Abkhazia, although he also expressed some frustration that many UN investigations and other activities take a long time to complete. He said a new mechanism was needed for peace talks in the South Ossetia conflict, at which point the Joint Control Commission (JCC) could become a forum for discussing military issues only. The donors' Steering Committee could serve a similar role for assistance issues, and other sector-specific formats could cover other issues.

Yakobashvili said he was not among those who called for simply throwing the Russian peacekeepers out. Instead, he thought that a way should be found to re-configure the currently all-Russian military force into an international force with a mandate focused on policing. He said Russia could have a role -- even perhaps the leading one -- in such a force.

¶7. (C) Yakobashvili said the donors' economic rehabilitation program in South Ossetia was working well -- so well that he would like to somehow copy it in Abkhazia. He said that, just like in Abkhazia, Georgia would seek to expand interaction between the sides in South Ossetia, through such things as trade, opening the Transcaucasian Highway, and talk with North Ossetia. He acknowledged the "well-known stories" of masked Georgian officials at the crossing point in Ergneti, and said that he understood the need to hide people's identities but the important thing was that these individuals act according to the law in their interactions with the public. He said there were limits to what could be achieved by pressure; once the Ministry of Internal Affairs had achieved deterrence -- e.g. through establishing police posts -- then it became the role of Yakobashvili's ministry to think about how to build support and defuse tensions.

¶8. (C) Yakobashvili said Kokoity's position inside South Ossetia was weakening, with the result that he was forced to concentrate almost solely on internal political struggles. Yakobashvili said he understood the Transnistrian authorities were intimating to the South Ossetians that the Russians were in the process of betraying them. He noted that the Russians have sent positive signals on meeting Georgian demands for customs checkpoints along the border with the separatist regions as part of WTO accession negotiations. A Georgian team would soon leave for Europe to discuss WTO and these issues, which would indicate where the Russians stood. He also noted that Nezavisimaya Gazeta had run two lengthy pieces on Sanakoyev, including at least one interview. While Yakobashvili said it was too soon to know for sure, he thought there were interesting indications of a possible Russian shift on South Ossetia.

¶9. (C) Yakobashvili's comments on South Ossetia square with the assessment OSCE's Hakala shared with the Ambassador February 4. She said Kokoity appeared to be in trouble at home, and was spending nearly all his time in Russia. She had the strong sense, based in part on her discussions with Russian officials, that the Russians were taking a new look at their policy. Hakala said she would like to see steps to increase economic intercourse between the sides, and expressed regret that both sides were putting up more barriers to freedom of movement at Ergneti. She noted that there had been a real problem with the water supply in Tskhinvali in recent weeks, but mixed teams of engineers had

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confirmed that the problem did not originate in the Georgian part of the pipeline.

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Sukhumi Radioactive Sources

¶10. (C) DCM outlined for Yakobashvili the ongoing discussions on removing the most dangerous radioactive sources in Sukhumi, noting that we understood Russia would soon send the Georgian government a letter proposing their removal to Russia. DCM stressed the importance of getting the material to a secure place and Yakobashvili agreed, commenting that in his view the fewer such materials on Georgian territory, the better for Georgia. Speaking personally, he did not have a problem with them going to Russia. Yakobashvili and DCM agreed to return to the issue once the Russian letter was received by the MFA. (Note: DCM also discussed the issue February 7 with MFA officials, who confirmed that the letter had not yet arrived.)

Comment

¶11. (C) Yakobashvili is a fount of ideas, and since taking this job he has shown little hesitation in speaking up publicly and privately for some provocative initiatives. He said that he told Saakashvili when he took the job that he

favored lifting sanctions on Abkhazia, opening the railroad, and talking to the Russians in a new way -- one that did not irritate them if it could be avoided. Yakobashvili's confidence suggests that he believes he has Saakashvili's support, and perhaps also that he knows he can return to a respected position in civil society whenever his government service ends. We may soon see how well Yakobashvili's activist approach works in the emotional Georgian politics surrounding Abkhazia, as well as in the hawkish inner circle.

His first high-profile negotiation will be the Geneva meeting with the Abkhaz and the Group of Friends February 18-19, and this may nearly coincide with the timing of a Kosovo decision and its consequences in Georgia. Yakobashvili is in the camp of Georgian officials who do not believe Russia will recognize Abkhazia, but he acknowledged that he could not know for sure.

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